

# Water Woes: It's a special commodity everyone takes for granted. But supply is shrinking, pipes are aging, and few are willing to pay the price

By Marianne Lavelle Posted 5/27/07

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**Corrected 6/1/07. A previous version of this story incorrectly identified Aqua America.**

The nation's hidden water problem rushed into the basement apartments of 51st Street in West New York, N.J., last February 9, shortly after 4 am. That's when a 2-foot-wide pipe ruptured under Bergenline Avenue, New Jersey's longest commercial thoroughfare. Water burst through the asphalt with the force of a geyser, then cascaded downhill. "It came down the street like rapids," says Anthony Avillo, the deputy fire chief on the scene. Families were awakened by water cresting over the sides of their beds or by neighbors screaming.

In the 18-degree cold, North Hudson Regional Fire and Rescue crewmembers lowered themselves chest-deep into the drink and deployed life rafts to help people escape. "We had one woman holding a baby and offering it up from the water like Moses," Avillo recalls.

Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt in the deluge, but 31 people, including 14 children, were forced from their homes—some for almost a month. And as is often the case with a major water-main break, the impact rippled far beyond the uprooted families. Water service abruptly stopped for 200,000 people in five of the nation's most densely populated towns, directly across the Hudson River from Manhattan.

Even when taps began to flow again, residents were warned to boil water because a main break can be a gateway for harmful bacteria. "It was really a nightmare, and it was dangerous," says Christopher Irizarry, chief executive of the North Hudson Community Action Corp., which assisted the stranded residents. The worst fear was that a fire would break out, because hydrants were dry. Water tankers were called in from miles away to stand by.

For the North Jersey communities, the crisis was over in 60 hours, when the break was repaired and the water deemed safe. But those who've examined the state of water around the nation and the globe say the crisis is only beginning. Mismanagement and climate change are shrinking clean water supplies worldwide.

The brunt of the problem is borne by the poor on every continent; those who have the resources, like denizens of that flashy desert capital of conspicuous wealth, Las Vegas, grab all the water they can find. In less arid regions, Americans take tap water for granted, but that's only because of hundreds of thousands of miles of underground pipe laid generations ago, much of it now decaying.

Studies by government and utilities agree that cities and towns will need to spend \$250 billion to \$500 billion more over the next 20 years to maintain the drinking water and waste-water systems we equate with modern living. The only debate is how to pay for it, in a country accustomed to paying about \$2.50 per 1,000 gallons—the lowest price for tap water in the developed world.

"There's a very widespread perception that water is a free good," says Steve Maxwell, a Boulder, Colo., consultant specializing in water and environmental issues. "It falls out of the sky—why should we pay for it? What is lost is the fact that we have to **treat it, move it around, store it, and distribute it to homes in a process that costs a heck of a lot of money.**"